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Program Management Course Student Study Program

THE EFFECT OF CREDIBILITY
GAPS WITHIN THE PROJECT
MANAGEMENT OFFICE
PMC 73-2

Jerry S. Smith
GS-12 DAC

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The Effect of Credibility Gaps Within the Project Management Office

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To show the need for an practicality of applying certain behavioral Science techniques in the project office environment.

STUDY REPORT ABSTRACT:

↙
In this study the writer discusses the effects of a credibility weakness on the project office. Since, credibility, or believability, is never completely attainable the writer discusses methods to determine the extent of credibility weaknesses, managerial behavior that produces credibility gaps, and the effect on employees and performance. Methods of minimizing the amount of stress on a manager's credibility are then outlined.

The purpose of this study is to show not only the need but the practicality of applying certain behavioral science techniques in the project office environment.

KEY WORDS: PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES MOTIVATION
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Executive Summary

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THE EFFECT OF CREDIBILITY
GAPS WITHIN THE PROJECT
MANAGEMENT OFFICE

Introduction

In this paper I will discuss the impact that a gap in credibility could have within a program management office. The areas to be considered are: the characteristics of credibility, managerial behavior that fosters credibility gaps and methods to foster believability.

The characteristics of a credibility gap include the following behavioral patterns which may be observed in employees: cautiousness, partial commitment, frustration, politics, defensiveness and deviousness. The degree to which these traits are observed among employees is indicative of not only the amount of employee mistrust but the amount of lost job performance.

These undesirable employee traits are symptomatic of improper managerial behavior such as cynicism, lying, concealed motives, lack of candor and lack of familiarity.

Finally, some of the methods by which foster believability are reviewed. I will attempt to outline certain

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This study represents the views, conclusions and recommendations of the author and does not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Defense Systems Management School nor the Department of Defense.

methods which, if employed with the proper attitude, should result in courses of managerial behavior that will reduce the stress on credibility.

Chapter I. Credibility in Management

Credibility is defined by Webster as "the quality of being credible" and credible as "worthy of belief or trust." Therefore establishing an atmosphere of mutual trust within a program office depends not only upon the inherent honesty of the Program Manager but upon the management team's credibility, or believability within its operational environment.

The importance of viewing credibility as a management team effort is expressed by Peter Drucker, who states:

"The best practices fail to breed the right spirit unless management bears witness for its own professed beliefs every time it appoints a man to a management job. The final proof of its sincerity and seriousness is uncompromising emphasis on integrity of character . . . In appointing people to top positions integrity cannot be over-emphasized. In fact, no one should be appointed unless management is willing to have his character serve as the model for all his subordinates."¹

He reemphasizes this point several times in his publication.

Unfortunately, most managers, in their own opinions, believe that they possess the qualities of character and integrity that Peter Drucker defines as a requisite for management. As a result, most people resent considering themselves as hypocritical, opportunistic or cynical, and through rationalization and self-deceit they can establish a self-image which is totally opposed to reality.

Frederic Faber states: "there are three fountains of self-deceit: the rarity of reliable self-knowledge; self's power to deceive self; and letting yourself be deceived by others".² A main thrust of his book is that the first step toward being truthful is the knowledge that we are far from it, particularly with ourselves.

On this point Arnold Ludwig is more direct. He states in his book, "The Importance of Lying":

"Truth and honesty are used as a matter of expediency to suit men's purpose and are abandoned at the drop of a hat when they are no longer useful. However, because of the stigma associated with lying or dishonesty, people have learned to consider almost all their behavior as truthful -- even when they are blatantly lying or hypocritical."³

With the educated and sophisticated employee being sought by the Project Manager, attempts to explain away, rationalize, or sweep under the rug questionable issues of the day are becoming more inappropriate. The high quality of employees expect frankness and ethics to replace mystical explanations, bewilderment and uncertainty. The blind following of a leader is almost totally nonexistent in today's environment.

Many times, however, inconsistencies between the philosophy of management and management practices are not deliberate attempts at deceit. In many cases the manager is not even aware of the credibility gap. Due to a busy schedule and other priorities he does not take the time to look for

indications of credibility weaknesses and he may feel it unnecessary to try to view himself as others see him.

One word of warning should be stated at this point. Integrity and principle are not to be interpreted as methods to rationalize improper behavior and malicious intent to justify rudeness and bad manners. Any system of ethics that is worth its salt will demand that man be decent and tolerant to his fellow man and by the same token, that he be considerate of himself.

When someone blindly or dogmatically follows a prescribed code of behavior simply because it happens to be labelled truth or scrupulously avoids an occasional lie when the lie may do worlds of good, he has sacrificed his good judgement for dogmatic principle, his reason for irrationality, his freedom for mental slavery, and his human instincts for deluded beliefs.⁴

As is evidenced by prejudices which remain against ex-convicts, when confidence in an individual is lost, his respect and esteem may never be regained. No matter how timely, how significant or how relevant a managers actions are, if they are not believed their effectiveness will be lost. The loss of believability in a program office may be translated into struggling to obtain adequate resources and support, as well as ineffectiveness by program personnel in meeting goals. This could ultimately result in loss of the project.

Since no one is 100% believable by all of the people with whom a Project Manager must interact a credibility gap must be assumed. The question is how much of a gap, the extent of awareness of it, what its effects are on the organization, and what actions can be taken to narrow it and reduce its negative consequences.

Chapter II. Characteristics of a Credibility Gap

With increasing constraints being placed on the manager by factors outside his immediate environment and a more sophisticated work force, management has turned to the humanist movement in an attempt to deal with the problem of credibility.

The initial step in dealing with a credibility gap is self-evaluation and the early detection of indications of a credibility weakness.

This writer will examine some of the behavioral characteristics which are illustrative of the behavioral pattern that develops when credibility is threatened. While it is recognized that the list could be expanded considerably, the following are considered to be of extreme importance:⁵

Cautiousness

Partial Commitment

Frustration

Politics

Defensiveness

Deviseness

Cautiousness - This becomes the better part of wisdom when management begins to vascillate between words and deeds in a yo-yo type of management style. The watchwords of the day under this type of management are, "We'll wait and see" and "don't rock the boat", will make work the order of the

day. As the size of the credibility gap increases the amount of cautiousness among program personnel will take a corresponding leap.

With vacillating leadership employees get caught up in the movement, after an initial delay to see if management really intended on doing what was said, and give positively to the effort. But eventually the lack of backing by the manager for the task at hand becomes apparent to the employees and frustration, accompanied by a quiet cautiousness sets in. Nobody wants to get caught off guard by being fully committed and making waves in an effort not fully backed by his base so make work becomes the rule of the day.

Once things get going the manager may openly admit that he was over optimistic and urge's everyone to re-group and shift priorities. Caution again sets in before reaction. The employees and lower management will wait to see how serious the manager really is before jeopardizing a particular function by releasing resources which may be required if the decision is reversed.

Partial Commitment - This is similar to overcautious except that it relies on giving only enough to maintain salary and image requirements and the participant doesn't dedicate himself to the work at hand.

Dealing with this problem of partial commitment is difficult.

"There are a wide variety of devices and techniques such as executive seminars, management courses, and T-groups which are designed to release this hidden potential. Any and all of these things have value. But of what use is insight or the stirring of personal motives when the demotivation of the system - the credibility gap in management itself foils every new notion that springs up in the minds of men?"⁶

Frustration - There are two types of reactions which are available to the employee when frustrated by management, fight back or withdraw psychologically. Since employees who fight back are recognized as a threat by management they will generally lapse into psychological withdrawal after a period of non-promotion and managerial criticisms.

The employee who lapses into frustration becomes paralyzed by a sense of futility and hopelessness in the real threat. He must push himself to work. Although his condition of frustration may have been caused by being under the leadership of a manipulative manager it is the employee who must take the blame for his loss of hope and feeling of futility.

Politics - This is usually the choice of the person who lacks integrity and finds himself in a threatening managerial climate. They pride themselves in being in the mainstream of activity and thought and never challenge the direction indicated by management, except superficially to avoid the obvious image of a yes man. Although he may agree in private, the politician cannot be counted on to provide even

silent support to innovative ideas if it won't enhance his position.

Defensiveness - This is a managerial attitude which results in the unwillingness to accept or support new or novel ideas. Under this type of management, not only are new ideas rejected but the employee who is persistent in advocating them will be viewed as either a dreamer or radical by the manager. Innovative employees will either stop advocating new ideas or leave the organization due to managerial pressures.

Deviseness - This is a form of behavior whereby employees seek security in people closer to them or in routines. The lack of cohesiveness invites infighting and cliques develop. This form of behavior is the first tendency of employees who have transferred from the same organization.

Chapter III. Managerial Behavior that Results in Credibility Gaps

If a gap in credibility can be related to employee attitudes then what is the effect of such a gap on management itself and what is the managerial behavior that produces credibility gaps?

As previously stated, managerial credibility can be directly related to employee morale and behavior. Previous managers could hide credibility behind the veil of organizational anonymity inherent in a highly structured organization. In the program office the Project Manager is more exposed and there is a greater awareness of his actions. Due to his unique position he is aware of and must pass judgement on virtually all major issues.

The problem is that "almost every important act of a corporation creates a situation of tension - what I like to refer to as the technical must versus the ethical ought".⁷ For example, should a manager promote from within or recruit a more qualified person from without, paint a favorable image or present problems at a briefing, encourage an older employee to retire during cutbacks or release a more capable younger employee?

Although the desire to achieve results is strong, and the need for innovative practices is essential for effective program management, this should not lead to the blatant misuse of authority to the extent that credibility is threatened.

Some of the more obvious examples of managerial behavior that produces credibility gaps are:

Cynicism

Lying

Concealed Motives

Lack of Candor

Lack of Familiarity

Cynicism - Selekman cites erosion of inner strength as the ultimate consequence of cynicism.

"To handle significant and complex responsibilities an executive should fortify himself with a sincere and abiding belief in the people around him." He goes on to state that confidence is won "inch by inch" as we extend it to others. "If this hard won quality is cast aside through the display of a cynical manner, not only does the manager lose his inner strength, he ultimately loses the faith of his subordinates as well".⁸

The cynical manager must rely on power instead of persuasion to achieve results. This use of power to obtain results implies that intimidation and fear will be a primary motivating force.

Lying - It is expected that there will be a slight gap between words and actions. This is normal and is a condition that no one can entirely avoid. The problem occurs when lying occurs with unnecessary frequency or when it is planned.

Concealed Motives - The bland assumption that action initiated by the manager will be accepted at its face value

is no longer valid. With the sophisticated work force and a fine tuned grapevine the work force is well equipped to probe and penetrate transparent managerial action.

Once fraudulent intent has been exposed and proven additional exposures of fraudulent intent will follow. Even the most sincere of actions a manager may then take may be exposed or fraudulent and, even without proof, these exposures will be accepted by the work force.⁹

Lack of Candor - One of the most obvious tendencies is to present a favorable image and to discount the unfavorable aspects in presentations to others. In their process of over optimism it is anticipated that problem, particularly engineering deficiencies and cost over runs, will be solved before results must be proven.

The idea of covering up works in the short run but when major problems that cannot be concealed start appearing as surprises the Program Managers statements will come to mean less and less.

In this process any actions the Program Manager may have taken, no matter how timely or unique, are discounted and displeasure with results sets in.

"Secondly, the Program Manager's own staff will do unto him what they see him do unto others. Things really go out of control then. The boss is not likely to think that the program is not aware of what is going on in his program - the boss will know it."¹⁰

Lack of Familiarity - Sociological as well as physical separation between the manager and his employees affects his influence. Since familiarity breeds contempt, separation of some type has become ingrained into the managerial style of many institutional managers.

It was observed by Flory and Mackenzie in their book "The Credibility Gap in Management", that those leaders who fear closeness are normally the ones who doubt their ability to influence without resorting the power of their positions.¹¹

The authors conclude that the greater the gap the less is the opportunity to sense discrepancies between group and organizational goals, the interchange of ideas, and the less the manager will know about his people and be able to show his genuine concern and respond to their needs.

Chapter IV. How Managers Foster Believability

This writer has not been able to discover any method whereby inherently unbelievable actions can be made believable. In fact, it becomes apparent that even inherently honest actions may be often doubted, with an aura of suspicion developing in the program office.

There are certain methods which, if used with a proper attitude, will outline courses of action that should lead the manager to behave in ways which will put minimum stress on his credibility. Typical actions which may be taken are listed below:

Keep Every Commitment

Act in Predictable Ways

Consistency of Philosophy and Management

Encourage the Airing and Sharing of Dissents

Reconciliation of Personal Goals

Underlying Attitudes

Keep Every Commitment - This may sound simple and so obvious that it does not appear to be worth mentioning. In this writers opinion if one cannot be relied on to honor this basic responsibility the development of an atmosphere of mutual trust within a project office will be precluded.

No one is expected to be able to carry through on everything that they commit themselves to due to changing priorities, unexpected events and countless other reasons. If it appears that a prior commitment can not be kept the

manager should advise the employees of this as soon as possible. In any event, a manager should never allow an employee to rely on him for something he either cannot or does not intend to do.

Act in Predictable Ways - Because the Program Manager has a loosely defined set of duties and is not restricted to a fixed organization, he can tailor his daily activities and managerial style as he sees fit. Accordingly, the opportunity for the manager's behavior to be seen as unpredictable is great. "If a manager cares about his believability he should act in ways which employees can predict and anticipate his actions and thereby avoid ambiguity."¹²

Consistency of Philosophy and Management - Many companies believe that their management philosophy should be written down and published as policy. This can be disastrous, however, because it can be used by everyone to compare actions against policies and point out areas where management lacks credibility.

Periodic reviews must be made and management practices reviewed to see if they conform with policy, both written and unwritten. To tolerate a glaring inconsistency in this area is an unnecessary threat to the credibility of any organization.

Encourage the Airing and Sharing of Dissent - The encouraging of constructive dissent and its resolution in the light of organizational goals should increase credibility and

strengthen confidence between employees and their management. When the most capable of these employees are penalized in various ways because they express ideas which create friction or their ideas are not seriously considered, then the confidence in the manager wanes.

Reconciliation of Personal Goals - Each man, at the same time, must fill many roles. He may be a Project Manager, father, husband, church member, member of the community and himself. Each one of these roles may exert a conflicting claim on what he is expected to do under various circumstances.

The failure to reconcile personal goals with organizational ones can "lead to fragmentation of effort, inner turmoil and frustration. The manager will remain compromised until these conflicting claims are resolved and at best he will appear weak and uncertain".¹³

Underlying Attitudes - Since believability is an atmosphere of mutual trust which exist between a Program Manager and his people even the most elaborate schemes to emulate trust by a manipulative manager will be disclosed by an unguarded comment, or expression. The application of various techniques advised by the behavioralists without an underlying attitude and philosophy will prove insufficient in periods of intense effort and strong competition.

"Credibility in management demands a management team that not only believes but lives three basic attitudes:

Trust, openness and freedom."

Trust is the basis for openness and freedom because it is only in a trusting environment that one can dare to be open. Openness does not mean a frankness so blunt that it leaves scars.

"The manager who opens his subordinate with either a sledgehammer or scalpel and sends him bleeding to his office to lick his wounds in solitude is not even on the first rung of the human relations ladder. When a manager provides openness like a door that invites one to come in and where there is comfort, support and reassurance, then satisfaction and fulfillment are a result of the relationship."¹⁴

Freedom is the final attitude. It is built upon, and can only exist, if attitudes of trust and openness have been mutually established. This is an attitude by which the people around the manager feel a sense of ease and assurance. Running room is provided that allows innovation and experimentation and action is encouraged without fear of the consequences. This freedom is maintained within bounds which respects the rights of others and strengthens by example the atmosphere of credibility existing within an office.¹⁵

Summary

I have attempted to show that credibility is an atmosphere of mutual trust and has significant impact upon the effectiveness of the program office. The effects of a credibility gap can be detected in the behavioral characteristics of employees which are relateable to managerial behavior. The point was stressed that since most managers consider themselves as honest no need is seen to look for signs of credibility weaknesses or take steps which will foster believability even though inherently honest actions may be misinterpreted.

It was concluded that there certain measures which can be taken which can foster believability but the key is that the application of these various techniques must be made with an underlying attitude of trust, openness and freedom. The emulation of trust without the proper underlying attitude and philosophy will fail. This is because practices will degenerate into improper behavior during periods of stress and because the managers underlying attitudes can be readily detected by an unguarded or expression.

In closing, I strongly feel that the application of behavioral management techniques to minimize the size of the gap in credibility is practical and becoming increasingly necessary in order for managers to keep pace with our changing environment.

Footnotes

- ¹The Practice of Management; Peter F. Drucker, Harper and Row, 1954, p. 157-158.
- ²Self-Deceit; Frederic Faber, Pendel Hill, 1949, p. 10.
- ³The Importance of Lying; Arnold M. Ludwig, C.C. Thomas, 1963, p. 211.
- ⁴Ibid., p. 228.
- ⁵The Credibility Gap in Management; Charles D. Flory, R. Alec Mackenzie, Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1971, p. 23.
- ⁶Ibid., p. 25.
- ⁷A Moral Philosophy for Managers; Benjamin M. Selekman, McGraw-Hill, 1959, p. 48.
- ⁸Ibid., p. 38.
- ⁹The Credibility Gap in Management; op. cit., p. 49.
- ¹⁰Introduction to Military Program Management; Logistics Management Institute Task 69-28, 1971, p. 35.
- ¹¹The Credibility Gap in Management; op. cit., p. 47.
- ¹²Ibid., p. 82.
- ¹³Ibid., p. 94.
- ¹⁴Ibid., p. 98.

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